
PRESTIGE
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LUSH
LIFE
JOHN
COLTRANE

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LUSH LIFE

JOHN COLTRANE

JOHN COLTRANE tenor saxophone
On #1-3: **EARL MAY** bass **ARTHUR TAYLOR** drums
Other selections: **DONALD BYRD** trumpet (#4) **RED GARLAND** piano **PAUL CHAMBERS** bass
LOUIS HAYES drums (#4) **ALBERT "TOOTIE" HEATH** drums (#5)

1	LIKE SOMEONE IN LOVE 4:57	4	LUSH LIFE 13:53
2	I LOVE YOU 5:29	5	I HEAR A RHAPSODY 5:58
3	TRANE'S SLO BLUES 6:01		

HERE IS ONE OF THE MUSICAL GIANTS of the 20th century, poised on the precipice of greatness. Between the spring of 1957 and the winter of 1958, during which time *Lush Life* was recorded, the music of tenor saxophonist John Coltrane (1926-1967) was developing in giant steps, thanks in great part to a six-month 1957 stint with Thelonious Monk that had much to do with sharpening Coltrane's harmonic conception and torrential attack.

Lush Life contains Coltrane's first recordings as sole leader, his initial date fronting a pianoless trio, and one of his first extended readings of a ballad, Billy Strayhorn's resplendent title track. We also hear him at the helm of a quartet and quintet, featuring pianist Red Garland, with trumpeter Donald Byrd added to "Lush Life." Coltrane and jazz would never be the same.

I remember the sessions well, I remember how the musicians wanted to sound, and I remember their reactions to the playbacks. Today, I feel strongly that I am their messenger. —RUDY VAN GELDER

Recorded by RUDY VAN GELDER at Van Gelder Studio, Hackensack, NJ on May 31, (#5) and August 16 (1-3), 1957; January 10, 1958 (4). Supervision by BOB WEINSTOCK. Remastering, 2005—Rudy Van Gelder (Van Gelder Studio, Englewood Cliffs, NJ). All transfers were made from the analog master tapes to digital at 24-bit resolution. Notes by JOE GOLDBERG. Total Time 36:00

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When the subject is John Coltrane, the same adjectives are always hauled out and used over again, not because of any lack of thought or imagination on anyone's part, but because there are only so many ways to tell the truth. Restless, probing, and searching are only a few of the words that have become clichés since Coltrane's rise to prominence. But how those words really apply to him only becomes clear when you stop to consider that they are never used in comparing Coltrane to another musician. And perhaps that is the key to the importance of John Coltrane. He is in competition with no one but himself.

It is important, in our society, for Brand X to be better than Brand Y, or for Teenager X to sell more records of a song about the agony of young love than Teenager Y, but to Coltrane, it is important only that a tenor solo of his own be superior to another tenor solo of his own. That is a lonely and frightening position to be in, but the only valuable things we have are given us by men in that position. It is why two Frank Lloyd Wright buildings or two Pablo Picasso paintings may have only the integrity of the artist to link them together, or why a man may run around a track all by himself, observed only by a stopwatch, his sole objective being to run faster than he himself ran the day before.

Of course, John does not build or paint masterpieces, and very possibly never harbored a secret desire to run the four-minute mile. He plays tenor saxophone, and as you listen to this record, your ear will immediately tell you that he has played differently in the past, and his career tells you that he will play differently in the future. To take a random example, one tune—"I Love You"—uses the famous Coltrane "sheets of sound." That expression probably causes him a good deal of discomfort, since it is a slightly slippery handle that people have used to grab hold of the elusive nature of his work, analyzing it out of all proportion to its use, as fan magazine writers might do (there are so many pictures in which Marlon Brando does not mumble, but the mumble is all you hear about). The "sheets of sound" are one tool out of many.

Tool is the proper word here, because Coltrane's music never exploits technique as an end in itself. But make no mistake, he possesses a very formidable technique. It is not waved about like a pennant, as some musicians do—even a quote, when he chooses to employ one (his favorite seems to be "All This and Heaven Too") is so deeply imbedded in the total musical line that you can't be really sure you heard it go by—but is always subordinated to the emotion being conveyed. And the fact that he is equipped to convey emotion, powerful emotion, is in itself enough to toss all theorizing out the window. How he does it is his concern and his business, and the mechanics should be of interest only to theorists. There is a certain point at which criticism must stop, or, to put it another way, the point of a joke, for instance, must be grasped intuitively—you will never laugh after it has been explained. So Coltrane is, as the expression goes, "saying something." But what is he saying? The expression, as I understand it, means that he is not simply up there on the stand or before the microphone "making the changes," playing his favorite little runs and phrases (although he has them, as does everyone), and killing time. But Coltrane is more aware than most musicians of the fact that music takes place in time, so he rarely wastes it.

More than that, though, the something he says is very specific, and while what I hear in his music undoubtedly reflects my preoccupations as much as his, the impressions may be worth setting down. One of his messages is his version of the blues. On this record, the example is titled, with admirable clarity, "Trane's Slo Blues." (If, by any chance, you have never heard his two magnificent blues performances, "Traneing In" and "Bass Blues," both on Prestige 7123, you are in the enviable position of being able to experience them for the first time, and should do so as soon as you can.) To begin with, there is his sound, and if you try to imagine a Coltrane line played by Coleman Hawkins or Lester Young, you will realize that his unique tone is as perfectly functional a vehicle for his ideas as anyone ever had. Beauty, it seems, along with many other things, ain't what it used to be. It is, to begin with, a lot harder to come by; one must wade through a lot of the muck of the world before getting to it. And, in anxious times (and much of Coltrane's music is a music of anxiety), a heart-on-the-sleeve kind of lyricism is no longer fashionable or even possible. It is hidden behind anger, behind harshness, behind doubt and anxiety, but, since those qualities are only the shield behind which a romantic, lyrical nature is often forced to hide, every once in a while the lyricism peeps through, in a sudden moment of stabbing beauty that you have to be quick to catch. Perhaps that is why Coltrane sometimes goes through so many of his pet phrases before coming to such a moment. But such a lyricism can only be suppressed, not hidden. Sooner or later it comes out, and is all the more worth having because of the necessity of waiting for it. You can hear the same thing in the music of Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, and perhaps that is why Coltrane worked so well with them. It is music that is perfectly suited to our times, with a complete sense of the tradition of the past (sometimes Coltrane's blues lines have a haunting suggestion of back-country guitar), but with an awareness that the kind of life that made that tradition possible has changed.

His ballads, though, are another matter. The example on this album is "Like Someone in Love" ("Lush Life," I think belongs in another category), and on a much earlier album, Prestige 7074, he plays a chorus of "How Deep Is the Ocean?" that is one of the loveliest things you are ever likely to hear (he doesn't play that way anymore, either, which in no way cancels out the beauty of what he was able to create). Here John's lyricism comes through unimpeded, and is a result of another kind of tradition, one that is being lost. He plays, literally, music for dancing of a type that neither the youngest jazzmen whose main experience is in the recording studio nor the big studio "dance-band" men have ever had the chance to learn. The best music is always close to the dance, in one way or another, and that John is able to play this way is nothing more than the results of "paying dues" in small roadhouse bands in and around Philadelphia. When you are dancing, there is no need to be hesitant about whatever romance is in you, and John recognizes that and plays for it beautifully.

Incidentally, one anecdote might serve to illustrate the relative roles that practicality, adaptability, and abstract theory play in his music. The three tunes I have mentioned are all by a trio (with Earl May on bass and Arthur Taylor on drums), and after I had listened to them, and been astonished by their fullness and completeness, there were several questions on my mind. Why did Coltrane choose to play without the piano, when his music is so completely harmonic? Did he feel freer, or more constricted? Did he want to record that way again? Had he played without the piano in clubs, and would he in the future? I asked him these questions, and the answer was immediate and succinct: "The piano player didn't show up," he said. A lot could be written about turning liabilities into assets, but you can hear for yourself.

The two remaining tunes were recorded with a full rhythm section. Red Garland, Paul Chambers, and Louis Hayes play on B1; Al Heath replaces Louis Hayes on B2. Billy Strayhorn's haunting and challenging "Lush Life," which adds Donald Byrd on trumpet, is a virtuoso performance. John plays the verse ad lib, moves into slow ballad tempo for a chorus, and then plays another chorus with the subtlest hint of double-time from Chambers and Hayes, a feeling which is maintained for delicate, sensitive contributions by Garland and Byrd before Donald shifts back to the slow tempo, to be rejoined by Coltrane for the ending. But the doble-time is used as accent, not, as with some musicians, as a mask to hide their inability to play ballads.

The "Rhapsody" John hears is a powerful, hard-swinging one, closing out the album on a strong note. In response to the inevitable question about influences, John said, "everything you play reflects all your experiences." Whatever those experiences are, they have contributed to a very valuable experience for the rest of us.

—JOE GOLDBERG
original liner notes

LUSH LIFE

LIKE SOMEONE IN LOVE
I LOVE YOU
TRANE'S SLO BLUES

LUSH LIFE
I HEAR A RHAPSODY

I WAS THE ENGINEER on the recording sessions and I also made the masters for the original LP issues of these albums. Since the advent of the CD, other people have been making the masters. Mastering is the final step in the process of creating the sound of the finished product. Now, thanks to the folks at the Concord Music Group who have given me the opportunity to remaster these albums, I can present my versions of the music on CD using modern technology. I remember the sessions well, I remember how the musicians wanted to sound, and I remember their reactions to the playbacks. Today, I feel strongly that I am their messenger. —RUDY VAN GELDER

LUSH LIFE REVISITED

SOME YEARS AGO, I was having lunch with the French jazz journalist Jean-Louis Ginibre, who was telling me about a record session John Coltrane had made with a left-handed bassist named Earl May.

I said I didn't know it.

"Yes, you do," Ginibre said. "You wrote the liner notes for it."

Well, that's the French for you. They know more about your business than you do. Ask any film director.

I probably would not have made the mistake if the session had been described to me as the one Coltrane made without a piano.

That session formed the major part of the first album I ever annotated for Prestige. These days, I remember it mostly because of the booklet accompanying Prestige's boxed set of Coltrane recordings, in which someone named Carl Woideck, giving a session-by-session analysis of Prestige's Coltrane holdings, says that I "failed to inquire" about the identity of the missing pianist (see my original notes included here), "later offering as his excuse the fact that this was the first time he had ever met Coltrane and he lacked the nerve to ask." I don't know how Mr. Woideck arrived at this conclusion. He never saw or spoke to me. Coltrane had been gone more than 20 years when Mr. Woideck wrote his report of the conversation. If he got his information from the reissue producer, who wasn't there either, then the reissue producer should be ashamed of himself. The simple truth is I wasn't interested enough to ask, not seeing it as part of my job to tell the potential audience for the record who they weren't going to get to hear.

But Bob Weinstock, Prestige's founder and the producer of these recordings, wasn't going to let a record date go to waste just because a piano player didn't show up. "Necessity is the mother," as Duke Ellington used to say. So what you get is the beginning of an impulse that would explode four years later in one of Coltrane's most celebrated recordings, "Chasin' the Trane."

What is notable here is how quickly and surely Coltrane adapts to the situation. Given his penchant for exploring chords and scales, it seems logical that he would be freer to investigate the possibilities in the absence of a harmony instrument in accompaniment, and even makes one wonder why, when he formed his own quartet he chose such a heavily chordal pianist as McCoy Tyner.

From the opening cadenza of the opening track, "Like Someone in Love," Coltrane's mastery is evident. As the great ones always do, he announces with the very first notes just who is playing. The tone tells you who it is. This track makes two things difficult to believe: that anyone ever thought Coltrane couldn't play, and that the performance is nearly 50 years old.

In addressing the matter of Coltrane's detractors, there are two things to keep in mind. One, jazz styles change at an astonishing rate of speed (Coltrane was leading his famous quartet only five years after Charlie Parker's death), and Coltane himself changed styles so quickly as to be remarkable even for jazz. If you went to hear him because you liked his latest record, he almost surely would not be playing in that style. It might even be more than coincidence that jazz stopped changing and began its long period of consolidation and retrenchment almost immediately after Coltrane's early death.

These recordings come from the period just before Coltrane became the leader of his own group and began his great ascendancy. He had been a member of the Miles Davis Quintet, which led to both his first notoriety (even though he had already played with Dizzy Gillespie and Johnny Hodges; Miles was a star-maker) and his Prestige contract, had been fired for drug-related problems, had been hired by Thelonious Monk for the quartet that played its epochal engagement at the Five Spot, and was then rehired by Davis, who by now had hired alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley and was leading a sextet.

Occasionally, Coltrane appeared on his own recordings in the same format as when he appeared with Miles Davis—the standard bop quintet of trumpet, saxophone, and rhythm. These are two such tracks here: "Lush Life" and "I Hear a Rhapsody." One seldom hears Billy Strayhorn's masterpiece, let alone with as much feeling as Coltrane summons here; and has anyone ever played it without the verse? Coltrane has the added comfort of two of his regular fellow-members of the Davis band, pianist Red Garland and bassist Paul Chambers. Still, Louis Hayes and Tootie Heath are not Philly Joe Jones and Donald Byrd is not Miles Davis.

What is easier to see about this music so many years later is context. Coltrane became a regular on the New York recording scene, sometimes playing more than one session a day, like the men who record jingles and background music all day long, sometimes, as in the routine blowing sessions budget-minded independent labels occasionally favored, producing startling half-choruses that are now the only reason to listen to those records.

The reason, talent aside, is simple. Coltrane was the other horn in the Miles Davis Quintet, the most influential band since the death of Charlie Parker, that band being compared, in terms of influence, to the Louis Armstrong Hot Fives and Hot Sevens, the band all the other bands tried to sound like. If that weren't enough, he was also the horn in the Thelonious Monk quartet that signaled that master's return from obscurity. And though we didn't know it at the time, he would soon form his own quartet and rival his mentors' influence and popularity.

And it almost didn't happen. One of the great debating points of the time was the rivalry, more apparent to fans than to participants, between Coltrane and Sonny Rollins. What is now forgotten is that Davis first offered the spot in his group to Rollins, who declined for personal reasons. Talent like Coltrane's can hardly ever be denied, but his rise to stardom was surely accelerated by being in that spot in that band just as the chrysalis was about to turn into a butterfly.

There was no doubt that by the time Coltrane came to the end of his swift journey, there were many who could not follow him. So it should not be so surprising that this period—before the encounter with Ornette Coleman, before "Ascension," before the 40-minute solos made possible by the advent of the long-playing record—remains many people's favorite Coltrane. The pure, sweet tone, the deep blues sensibility, the harmonic virtuosity, and above all the "cry"—the humanity of the sound—that formed the basis of the startling things he would go on to show us in the brief time he had left.

—JOE GOLDBERG

June 2005

RUDY VAN GELDER REMASTERS

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SONNY ROLLINS–Saxophone Colossus (PRCD-8105-2)

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1 LIKE SOMEONE IN LOVE
(Van Heusen-Burke) Bourne Co./
Dorsey Bros. Music-ASCAP 4:57

2 I LOVE YOU
(Cole Porter) Chappell
& Co.-ASCAP 5:29

3 TRANE'S SLO BLUES
(John Coltrane) Jowcol
Music-BMI 6:01

4 LUSH LIFE
(Billy Strayhorn) Tempo
Music-ASCAP 13:53

5 I HEAR A RHAPSODY
(Fragos-Baker-Gasparre)
Copyright Control 5:58

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with
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Supervision by BOB WEINSTOCK

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